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ABSTRACT

To obtain practitioner input on the research agenda for adult basic education (ABE), practitioner leaders from the Practitioner Dissemination and Research Network (PRDN) conducted nine focus groups with ABE practitioners in their states. The focus groups examined three topics: issues that concern practitioners in ABE; ways practitioners see their concerns being addressed by current and future research; and the PRDN's role. Overall, the practitioners in ABE were looking for answers and stepping stones to improve ABE practice. They expected research to address their concerns and were generally anxious to work with researchers in designing and conducting studies that address their concerns. The following were among the practitioner concerns identified: student recruitment, retention, and motivation; program and policy (program structure and funding); curriculum and instruction; assessment of student and program performance; "special" students' needs; staff issues and professional development; impact of ABE on students' lives outside the classroom; and ways of working with a variety of learners in one class. (Appended are the following: focus group protocol; tables detailing the focus group participants by state and number of affinity diagram items by state; questions for the research agenda; and categories of issues of concern to focus group participants.) (MN)

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NCSALL

National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy

"PRACTITIONERS SPEAK: CONTRIBUTING TO A RESEARCH AGENDA FOR ADULT BASIC EDUCATION"

by

Practitioner Dissemination and Research Network:
Mary Beth Bingman, Cristine Smith, and Kimberly Stewart
with Anne Burnett, Helena Devereux, Judy Gooden, David Hayes, Arthur LaChance, Joan LaMachia, Pam Meader, Alan Tate, and Kristin Tiedeman

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NCSALL REPORTS #4
July 1998

The National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy
Harvard Graduate School of Education
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Executive Summary

The National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL) is committed to conducting and disseminating research that is used to improve the practice of adult basic literacy education. As part of this effort, NCSALL has developed the Practitioner Dissemination and Research Network (PDRN). This network of practitioner leaders builds research connections between practitioners and NCSALL researchers. In the summer of 1997, practitioner leaders conducted focus groups with practitioners in their states. This report summarizes the results of these nine focus groups.

These focus groups were part of NCSALL's work in developing a comprehensive research agenda for the field of adult literacy, one of two research agendas NCSALL is helping develop for the field of adult basic education. In these agendas, the input of practitioners is combined with the input from administrators, policymakers and researchers. This document, however, provides an opportunity to hear directly from practitioners and to learn about the realities of practitioners' work

The PDRN focus groups gathered data on three related questions:

- What issues concern practitioners in adult basic education?
- How do practitioners see these concerns being addressed by current and future research?
- What do practitioners see as the role of the PDRN in their states?

The concerns of the teachers and program administrators fall into eight categories:

- Issues of student participation: recruitment, retention, and motivation
- Program and policy issues, particularly program structure and funding
- Curriculum and instruction issues
- Assessment of students and measurement of program performance
- The needs of "special" students, including those with learning difficulties, teens, and the elderly
- Staff issues and professional development
- The impact of adult basic education on students' lives outside the classroom
- Working with a variety of learners in one class

Participants in these groups asked for research that:

- Addressed their areas of concern
- Has implications for practice

- Is conducted in a variety of sites in both rural and urban settings
- Includes practitioners in the research
- Is disseminated in a variety of ways
- Is reported concisely in "user-friendly" language

Practitioners in adult basic education are looking for answers and for stepping stones to improve practice. They expect research to address their concerns and many are anxious to work with researchers in designing and carrying out studies that do so.

I. Introduction

In the summer of 1997, the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL), through its Practitioner Dissemination and Research Network (PDRN) initiative, organized focus groups in nine states to collect information about adult basic education. These focus groups were part of NCSALL's effort to help the field of adult basic education articulate a comprehensive research agenda. This report summarizes the findings of these focus groups and offers conclusions and recommendations. The results from these nine focus groups provide a rich insight into the issues faced by adult basic education (ABE) practitioners and into their hopes for NCSALL and other researchers in the field of adult basic literacy.

NCSALL is a collaboration between Harvard Graduate School of Education, World Education, the Center for Literacy Studies at the University of Tennessee, Rutgers University and Portland State University. The goal of NCSALL is to help adult basic education practitioners better serve adult learners by pursuing basic and applied research in the field of adult basic education; building partnerships between researchers and practitioners; disseminating research and best practices to practitioners, scholars, and policymakers; and working with the field to develop a comprehensive research agenda.

NCSALL is a partner in two collaborations that are developing research agendas for the field. One collaboration involving NIFL and OVAE/DAEL is developing an agenda for the broad field of ABE, English as a second language (ESOL) and adult secondary education. In a second collaboration, NCSALL is working with NCLE on an agenda specifically addressing ESOL. Practitioners are part of these two collaborations' efforts but the voice of practitioners is combined with input from administrators, policymakers and researchers. This document, however, provides an opportunity to hear the direct voices of practitioners.

The PDRN is a research and development effort working to link adult basic education practitioners and NCSALL researchers. The goal of the PDRN is to create and support systematic partnerships between practitioners and researchers in the field of adult basic education. The PDRN intends to:

- help practitioners participate in NCSALL's work through involvement in NCSALL research studies,
- disseminate information about NCSALL's studies and research results to practitioners,

- connect practitioner researchers and NCSALL researchers studying similar issues,
- encourage practitioner research related to NCSALL research, and
- provide training and financial support to practitioners to conduct inquiry projects related to NCSALL research.

At the heart of the PDRN are the Practitioner Leaders. Practitioner Leaders, who are adult basic education teachers in each participating state, serve as liaisons between practitioners and NCSALL. The Practitioner Leader works with support from state Department of Education and State Literacy Resource Center representatives to facilitate the sharing of information between practitioners and researchers. Currently, nine Practitioner Leaders work in two regions of the United States, the Southeast and the Northeast. Practitioner Leaders are located in Georgia, Kentucky, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, Tennessee, Vermont and Virginia. The focus groups were conducted by these Practitioner Leaders.

The PDRN focus groups gathered data on three related questions:

1. What issues concern practitioners in adult basic education?
2. How do practitioners see these concerns being addressed by current and future research?
3. What do practitioners see as the role of the PDRN in their states?

In this report we first review the process used in these focus groups and the ways the results have been analyzed. Then we examine the findings about areas of concern to the participants. Next we examine the findings that address the participants' views on research and how research can best meet their needs. Finally we offer our conclusions and recommendations.

II. Methodology

A. Focus group format

NCSALL PDRN staff (a national coordinator at World Education, and regional coordinators at World Education in the northeast and The University of Tennessee in the southeast) developed the protocol for the three hour focus groups. Practitioner Leaders received a five-page protocol and training guide from PDRN staff. Practitioner Leaders were asked to identify five to eight practitioners representative of their state's literacy program staff, from urban and rural, ESOL, volunteer programs, etc. These practitioners were invited to take part in the focus

group and were paid $75 - $100 for their participation. The Practitioner Leader identified another person to help with the facilitation and documentation of the focus group. The sessions were audiotaped and the facilitators took written notes. The focus groups were conducted in June and July, 1997. The number of participants in each group varied from three to ten; most were teachers, but program directors, counselors and other program staff were also represented. (See Appendix A for a description of each group.) Each Practitioner Leader wrote a report on the focus group. The PDRN staff at World Education collected the audiotapes and the reports.

The process for the focus groups included the following steps:

1. An introduction by the facilitator to the purpose of the focus group.
2. A discussion of how a focus group is conducted and basic ground rules for participation in the focus group.
3. An "affinity diagram" process (see Appendix A), in which individuals identified questions or problems they were facing in their work. Then, working in small groups, the problems or questions that were similar (had "affinity") were grouped and labeled by a phrase that categorized that group.
4. An overview, by the facilitator, of the research currently being conducted or planned by NCSALL.
5. A group discussion of how such research might address practitioners' questions and concerns, and what other research is needed in the future.
6. A solicitation of suggestions of how research results might best reach practitioners in order to help them with their questions or problem.
7. Development of two to three critical research questions on areas of concern not currently being addressed by NCSALL.
8. A discussion of the role of the PDRN in their state.

(The complete protocol is found in Appendix B.)
Without exception the Practitioner Leaders were positive about the experience of facilitating the groups.

B. Analysis

There have been three stages of analysis of the data from the focus groups. First, the Practitioner Leaders used their notes from the focus groups to develop written reports that included sections on:

- the categories from the affinity diagram,

- ways in which participants felt NCSALL research could help them address their problems.
- ways in which NCSALL research could best reach them.
- specific questions to add to the ABE research agenda.
- ideas for the PDRN.
- comments on the focus group.

While all Practitioner Leaders followed this report format, the amount of detail in each section varied considerably from report to report. Some reports summarized the information in each section while others included each comment. A few focus groups did not cover every activity outlined in the guide.

In July 1997 the Practitioner Leaders met in Boston with PDRN staff and conducted a second analysis of the results from the nine focus group reports. In small groups, the Practitioner Leaders took the information from a particular activity in each focus group and analyzed it, looking for categories and trends. The similarities and differences among and between focus groups were then discussed in a large group. The categories they found provided a starting point for the next phase of the analysis.

For the third stage of analysis reported here we have combined the data from the nine focus group reports. We used qualitative analysis to identify categories in the data and grouped these categories into two broad areas: (1) the problems and concerns of the participants that might be topics of research and (2) comments on how research findings can be most useful to the participants. We have identified subcategories in most of the categories in each broad area.

The broad area of problems and concerns includes data from activities in the focus groups where practitioners do affinity diagrams and pose questions to be added to the research agenda. In the focus groups each participant had time to think of questions or problems that they face in their work-- broad areas of concern more than specific issues. Then as a group, the participants combined the questions or issues that had some "affinity" and labeled each with a phrase that categorized the problem represented by that group. In their written reports the Practitioner Leaders reported these categories and the questions and problems in each.

The Practitioner Leaders' reports contained a total of sixty-three affinity categories, with number per focus group varying from four to thirteen. There was some overlap in these categories by title across the nine reports; however, when the items that made up the categories were examined, this overlap did not always hold up. In an effort to get a sense of the entire data set, our analysis aggregated

everything reported in the affinity diagram section of the reports. We identified eight categories from these data and coded the combined data set (affinity categories and comments from all nine reports).

In the findings we report the numbers of comments in the various categories, in order to give a sense of how often particular issues arose, and we give examples of the concerns raised. These numbers should be used with some caution due to the variety in the original reports. The total number of affinity diagram items reported per state ranged from four for Vermont to sixty-two for New Hampshire. The numbers for each category are summarized in Appendix C.

During the focus groups, participants identified research questions they felt might not be addressed by the four broad questions of NCSALL's current research projects:

1. How can the motivation of individual adult learners be sustained and enhanced?
2. How can classroom practice be improved?
3. How can staff development more effectively serve adult learning and literacy programs?
4. What impact does participation in adult learning and literacy programs have on an adult's life and how can this impact be effectively assessed?

The groups identified critical "gap" areas of concern from their affinity diagram process which they thought were not covered by current NCSALL research projects and then developed research questions for future research in that area. We have sorted these questions using the same categories as with the affinity diagram data. Because some research questions parallel comments drawn from the affinity diagram discussion, some overlap exists. All are included in Appendix D.

The second broad area of analysis focuses on the usefulness of research. In facilitating the focus groups, after the affinity diagram process, the Practitioner Leaders asked their groups to discuss how NCSALL's research might help them address their concerns; in other words, how research could be most valuable. Then the discussion focused on how results of this research could reach them in their classrooms so that it would really help them address their problems. The first question was intended to focus on the way the planned research should be conducted to be most useful and the second question focused on dissemination of the research. The Practitioner Leaders were asked to report their results in the same way. However the reports (and probably the discussions) mixed these two areas of discussion. We have done the same in this report, combining the

responses to, "Ways in which participants felt NCSALL research could help them address their problems," with, "Ways in which participants felt that NCSALL research could reach them in order to help them."

We have grouped the responses in three categories. Twenty-four of the responses dealt with topics for research; ten were comments on the research process; and ninety-two were suggestions for how to disseminate the research. Each of these categories was sorted into subcategories as reported in the findings.

III. Findings

A. Areas of concern and research questions

After we combined the affinity group data from the reports, we identified phrases and research questions reflecting particular issues, and from these 241 fragments we identified eight categories.

1. Recruitment, retention, motivation (58)
2. Program and policy issues (41)
3. Curriculum and instruction (28)
4. Assessment and standards (27)
5. "Special" students (26)
6. Staff issues and professional development (24)
7. Impact on students' lives outside the classroom (21)
8. "Integr ·ed" classrooms (16)

Within each of these categories additional subcategories were identified. In these subcategories there is some overlap, and some statements were assigned to more than one subcategory.

This process is somewhat arbitrary and certainly different categories could be obtained. (For example, a separate category was not reported for references made to ESL or ESOL, as all ESOL-related items could be placed in existing categories.) But this preliminary report should give a sense of the concerns of these nine groups of practitioners. The following sections review the categories drawn from the affinity diagram process data and corresponding research questions and give examples, in the form of direct quotes, from the nine reports (in italics) and the number of items (in parentheses) regarding the topic brought up during the focus group.

1. Recruitment, retention, motivation, participation

The greatest number of comments and questions were about issues of student participation: how to get people into class, how to keep them there, how to motivate learning, and how to deal with barriers to learning. This was an issue in eight of the nine groups and had the largest number of comments in four states.

a. Main concerns (58)

Recruitment (6)

- *If we are to "market" our product, how do we need to offer it up to our target population, who are basically not-in-need? (GA)*

Retention (14)

- *Retention -- What types of things work? Learning contracts? Bonding? Student Support Groups? (KY)*
- *Why do some students stop coming to class after showing great interest in the beginning ? (TN)*

Motivation (22)

- *How to motivate students to participate and follow through with their goals (ME)*
- *How to motivate ADD students -- when there are time constraints? (NH)*

Barriers to participation (16)

- *Obstacles to students learning, including experiences from the native country.(MA)*
- *How come some students' problems outside of school have too big an influence on their ability to come to school? (NH)*

b. Research questions (8)

- *How can ABE students be motivated to learn new things with all the distractions of their lives? (NH)*
- *What effect does the lack of sufficient facilities have on recruitment and retention? (GA)*

2. Program and policy issues

This category contains concerns that relate to issues that tend to be decided on a program or policy level or with system operations at a level beyond the classroom. With forty-one references, this is the second largest category.

a. Main concerns (41)

Time and money (14)

- *What's a good way to obtain adequate, ongoing (not yearly) funding for programs? (VA)*
- *Why are adult ed salaries generally so low? (VT)*

Program structure and curriculum (11)
- *Are programs realistically preparing students for the 21st century? (RI)*
- *Is an open-ended enrollment policy the most effective way to enroll students and structure programs? (NH)*

Systems, administration (6)
- *Paper work concerns: What should be included in intake? Attendance records, separation sheets; is all this paperwork necessary? Can record keeping be made easier? (ME)*

Relationships outside ABE/ESOL (10)
- *How can Adult Ed form coalitions with other agencies to maximize resources? (VA)*

b. Research questions (9)
- *What are the characteristics of a model adult education program, and what are the costs? (ME)*
- *Compare/contrast adult education service systems. Points of comparison might include delivery models, funding distribution streams, quality indicators, credentialing. (VT)*

3. Curriculum and instruction

This category includes concerns about how and what to teach. These twenty-eight issues were subcategorized as follows:

a. Main concerns (28)

Uses of technology (4)
- *How do we plan for and include technology in curriculum? (RI)*

Instructional strategies (11)
- *How can I help students to move on from a plateau? (MA)*
- *How to administer group-oriented lessons when members of the group attend inconsistently? (NH)*

Thinking skills (3)
- *How do we develop thinking skills? (KY)*

Math and science (3)
- *How can we strengthen the teaching of mathematical concepts? (NH)*

Reading and language (7)
- *What are good techniques to encourage low level reading students to read outside the classroom? (MA)*

b. Research questions (2)
- *What are the (most) appropriate uses -- if any -- of technology in adult ed? (VT)*
- *What are the most effective teaching and assessment methods for each of the*

various described multiple intelligences (assumes building off the present multiple intelligences study)? (VT)

4. Assessment and standards

The participants in these focus groups thought about assessment in a variety of ways. Some asked for assessment in order to better place students. Others were interested in measuring learning gains or the outcomes of participation in their programs. We have included concerns about standards in this category because standards are part of the broader system of performance assessment.

a. Main concerns (27)

Placement (5)

- *Is there a good short tool for placement purposes which is valid and non-threatening? (VA)*

Program effectiveness (2)

- *How can we evaluate the effectiveness of different types of curriculum? (MA)*

Measuring learning gains (11)

- *Lack of definition of "progress of learning" for our learners (ME)*
- *Evaluating - in ESL - simple standard tests - are they available so that the students can see where they begin and where they are going? (NH)*

Impacts and outcomes (6)

- *How do we know how students use what we teach them? (MA)*

Standards (3)

- *Incorporating "standards" into adult ed programs: Whose standards? What standards? How? Why? (ME)*

b. Research questions (7)

- *How do we as educators know what our adult learners are learning, when they are using it and what form of assessment should be used? (MA)*
- *What level of learning or skill does a student need in order to use portfolio assessment as a means of assessment? How does a student self evaluate? (ME)*

5. "Special" students

We include here concerns about students with learning disabilities or limited progress, about how to help people with emotional difficulties, and concerns about teens and the elderly.

a. Main concerns (26)

Teenagers (5)

- *Should there be admissions requirements for teens? Counseling? (NH)*

Elderly (2)

- *How do we address the difficulties faced by elderly students? (NH)*

Mental health concerns (3)

- *How do we help students who've suffered severe trauma -- loss, war, re-settlement? (VA)*

Students with limited progress and learning disabilities (16)

- *How to assist the student with his/her learning disability (ME)*
- *How can we better serve students who show no learning progression from year to year? (TN)*

b. Research questions (10)

- *How do we know whether there is a learning disability or a language barrier that is hampering an ESOL student? (MA)*
- *What are the best approaches to help adults with learning disabilities? (VA)*

6. Staff issues and professional development

This category includes concerns about the work conditions of practitioners and concerns about staff development in general. This category also includes references to assessing the effectiveness of teachers and to staff development around a particular issue, e.g. learning disabilities or reading instruction.

a. Main concerns (24)

Assessing effectiveness as a teacher (5)

- *What is the professional and personal profile of an effective teacher? (GA)*

Credentialing (5)

- *Teacher training and validation: impact of certification for adult ed teachers? (VT)*

Method and content of staff development (11)

- *How do we develop effective staff development programs and methods? (KY)*

Professional development system issues (3)

- *A lack of a system for teacher staff development to lead to teacher certification (ME)*

b. Research questions (4)

- *Does the education level of instructor effect student achievement? Educational level vs. teacher certificate (KY)*
- *What is an effective practitioner? How can I assess my effectiveness? Are full-time practitioners more effective than part-time? If so, how ? If they are more effective, then how can we move toward full-time employment? (VA)*

7. Impact on students' lives outside the classroom

This category includes questions and issues that practitioners raised about the impacts of their work on students' lives. These are concerns about how participation in adult literacy programs can make a difference in the lives of adult learners outside the class.

a. Main concerns (21)

Concerns about the value of adult basic education in people's lives (5)

- *Are we really preparing people or are we giving them more superficial treatment? (GA)*

Concerns about how to best prepare people for employment (4)

- *Transfer of knowledge from classroom to life - How do we teach higher level thinking skills? (KY)*

Skills people need in their lives (12)

- *How do we teach decision-making? Social communication?(VA)*
- *How do we as instructors assist students with coping skills? (GA)*

b. Research questions (3)

- *Social issues and attitudes regarding the value of education: What are businesses expecting from our GED graduates? What would make them more eligible for the job? (GA)*
- *What can we do in our classrooms that will help our students break the low achievement cycle in their families? (NH)*

8. "Integrated" classrooms

This category is similar to the previous one, but we decided to separate the two because the integrated classroom referred to issues of dealing with a variety of learners in one class, rather than problems with particular students' learning.

a. Main concerns (16)

Multi-age classes (3)

- *Applied to ages and/or levels? Does the process of having a wide variation of student ages and levels of competency in the same classroom have a bearing on the learning process? (GA)*

Multi-level classes (10)

- *What are some effective practices to manage a multi-level class including curriculum and assessment? (MA)*

Multi-cultural classes (3)

- *How do we address multi-cultural and economic backgrounds -- respecting differences?(NH)*

b. Research questions (4)

- *Explore the variety of effective technology and curriculum for adult non-readers and determine applicability to low-level readers, learning disabilities, mental retardation, multilingual, various cultural backgrounds and regional differences. (GA)*
- *What is the best way to teach reading in a multi-level classroom? (NH)*

Welfare reform

There were also three comments that referred directly to welfare reform. This is an issue that is having an increasing impact on adult education programs. These comments were:

- *How to deal with welfare reform and its discouragement of education (MA)*
- *How can we provide short , intensive instruction for Welfare Recipients (due to welfare reform) when they typically have the biggest educational deficits and learning problems? (NH)*
- *How will welfare reform impact enrollment in adult ed classes? (RI)*

B. Usefulness of research

Part of the focus group discussions centered on how results of research could reach practitioners in their classrooms in ways that would really help them address their problems, as well as on ways the planned research should be conducted in order to be most useful to practitioners.

We have grouped the responses in three categories: topics for research; improving the research process; and suggestions for research dissemination.

1. Topics for research

The comments on topics for research were categorized using the same categories as in the areas of concern from the affinity diagram. These are all responses to the question about how NCSALL research could help them. The number of comments from each category are listed after the topic.

- Impact on students' lives outside the classroom (5)
- Program and policy issues (5)
- Recruitment, retention, motivation (5)
- Assessment and standards (4)
- Curriculum and instruction (2)
- Staff issues and professional development (2)
- "Integrated" classrooms (1)
- "Special" students (0)

For the most part these suggestions either referred to specific NCSALL studies or were comments similar to those in the previous sections. However the suggestions from Georgia and Vermont on program or policy concerns give a perspective on what the practitioners in these focus groups hope for from research and research establishments:

The research would be valuable if it...

- *lends credibility to our program.*
- *leads to increased funding/resources. (VT)*

NCSALL should...

- *become a baseline information source for assistance in data reporting for grant application.*
- *provide guidelines for policy writing.*
- *generate ideas for improved programs. (GA)*

2. Improving the research process

We found ten comments on the research process in the responses to how the research could be most helpful. These focused on how to conduct research so as to make it "real." These include comments on site and focus:

- *Includes rural areas in research as well as urban areas. (ME)*
- *Includes real students in real classrooms with real challenges. (MA)*
- *Has a holistic focus: whole person, families. (VT)*

There were also comments on who should be doing the research, comments that were echoed in suggestions about how to best reach the classroom with dissemination.

- *[If research] had been done by people who actually work in classroom. (NH)*
- *Could practitioners be paid to field-test research findings to check on their validity? (VA)*

3. Suggestions for dissemination of research

These focus groups were as productive in offering suggestions for dissemination of research as they were in expressing their problems and issues of concern. We identified 92 suggestions from this discussion on ways to increase the likelihood that NCSALL research results will make a difference to the field of practice in adult literacy education. Fifty-three of these were suggestions about methods of dissemination. The following are the dissemination methods suggested.

- print publications (11)
- workshop presentations (10)
- television and video (6)
- presentations at conferences (5)
- on-line, listserv, Internet (5)

- interactions with researchers (5)
- "live" presentations (4)
- peer discussion (3)
- networking (2)
- audio tapes (1)
- visual aids (1)

There were fifteen comments about the preferred language and format for research products. Some of these were:

- *Is user friendly. (ME) (VT)*
- *Needs to be more detailed. (MA)*
- *Is reported in clear, every-day language. (VA)*
- *Take research and rewrite for a general audience. (KY)*
- *Something short and concise. (TN)*
- *Written in easily understood, interesting layperson's terms. (NH)*
- *Is not steeped in statistical data. (VT)*

The other comments on dissemination had to do with ways to make research results useful to teachers. These twenty-four comments focused on practicality and on concrete applications in the classroom. Some examples:

- *[It would be helpful if it] had recommendations or suggestions on what to do with it, if it uses resources that are readily available and inexpensive and practical. (ME)*
- *Research needs to have clear practical implications, not just statistics. Hard to analyze quantifiable research and do mentoring. I have questions all the time, I want positive steps to take. (MA)*
- *Demonstrates effective, concrete teaching models and methods. (VT)*
- *Need practical applications for research. (KY)*

There were also suggestions for teacher research in developing and piloting applications and for teacher research as a way to ensure that research meets the needs of practitioners. For instance:

- *Pilot new methods in model learning centers (KY)*
- *Opportunities and activities to help teachers test it out - bring theory to the classroom in a concrete way. (MA)*
- *Practitioners in Virginia would like to be involved in the whole research process, developing questions, collecting data, trying out new techniques. (VA)*

C. The role of the PDRN

The final activity in the focus groups was a discussion about the role of the PDRN in each state. The comments were suggestions directed to the particular state in which each focus group was held, rather than the to the PDRN as a national network. It is worth noting that of the fifty-three various comments and suggestions, nineteen were about teachers being involved in research. Practitioners in these groups thought that the role of the PDRN included:

- *Informing practitioners of possible grants available for practitioner research. (ME)*
- *Have practitioner leader meet with groups across the state to help set up and facilitate research groups. (KY)*
- *Create ways and opportunities for teachers to share their own research, set goals for programs, give periodic feedback on research in progress, help researchers to stay close to the practical realities of adult literacy. (MA)*

IV. Conclusions

The field of adult basic education is diverse: teachers serve non-readers; prepare students for the GED; provide ESOL instruction, native language literacy and citizenship classes; and teach in hospitals and factories. Teachers are part-time and full-time, experienced and new, work in urban and rural communities, and teach at government-funded and privately-funded programs with varying degrees of support and channels for resource sharing. Teachers, administrators, coordinators, counselors, and program directors participated in the focus groups. A handful plays more than one of these roles in their programs. This allowed for a variety of perspectives and resulted in a wide range of concerns.

Eight categories of common concern emerged from the focus group reports: impact on students' lives outside of the classroom; curriculum and instruction; "special" students; "integrated" classrooms; staff issues and professional development; recruitment, retention, motivation, and participation; program and policy issues; and assessment and standards.

Of the eight categories, staff issues and professional development proved to be a constant concern, especially in questions regarding how staff development should be structured. Concerns around the issues of recruitment, retention, motivation and participation were felt most often, with emphasis placed on strategies for keeping students in class, motivation techniques and identifying obstacles that may possibly inhibit students' learning. There was discussion around issues of program funding, program structure,

curriculum, learner assessment, learning disabilities, the multi-level classroom and teaching life skills.

Practitioners identified topics they would like research to address. Among the most common were the following: learning disabilities, model programs and program support systems, and student and teacher assessment. In thinking about future research, practitioners felt they would benefit most from research done on the following topics: impact on students' lives outside the classroom; recruitment, retention, motivation, and participation; and program and policy issues.

Many suggestions were made in the focus groups about improving the research process and disseminating research to practitioners in a useful way. Practitioners believe that research can be improved by allowing teachers and students to take part in a study, conduct practitioner research on a similar topic, or pilot the results. There is a strong feeling from practitioners that this would keep research in touch with the realities of the classroom. Recommendations for disseminating research were many. Practitioners agreed that the language of research reports intended to reach programs needs to be clear, concise and written for a general audience. They would find research results especially useful if concrete classroom applications accompanied research results. Among the many ideas brainstormed, the following methods of disseminating research results were thought to be the most productive: publications, workshop and conference presentations by researchers or research assistants, television/video, the Internet, and peer discussion.

Discussion about the role of the PDRN focused primarily on individual states' needs, although the theme of teacher research appeared often. Practitioners hope Practitioner Leaders will help teachers use existing research, find funding for practitioner research, and create opportunities for teachers to share their own research.

The analysis process used in this report is not intended to explore all the possible interpretations of this data but to give the field, NCSALL and others involved in setting research agendas a sense of the concerns expressed by participants in these focus groups. Practitioners in adult basic education are looking for answers and stepping stones to improve practice. This report shows practitioners' enthusiasm for being involved in research, the strength of their demand for research and their desire for collaboration between the field of adult basic education and academia.

Appendix A
Protocol for NCSALL focus groups: 3 ½ hours

1. Introductions, purpose of this focus group (10 minutes)

- Welcome everyone to the focus group. Ask each person to introduce themselves, the program they're from, their role (teacher, counselor, etc.).

  Explain to the group the purpose of the group, using the following points written on newsprint:

NCSALL Focus Group: Objectives
• Hear about your issues and concerns as practitioners in adult basic education • Help you learn about NCSALL and its research activities • Ask you to think of critical areas for research • Get your thoughts about NCSALL's efforts to include practitioners in research and dissemination (Practitioner Dissemination and Research Network)

  Ask if anyone has questions or comments. Explain that you know that they probably don't have much idea yet about what NCSALL is but that you will be providing an overview during the time together. Deal with immediate logistics (where bathrooms are, there will be a break, you'll answer questions about stipends, etc. at the end...)

2. What is a focus group? Ground rules (15 minutes)

  Ask if anyone in the group has ever been part of a "focus group" before. If so, ask them to say very briefly what that experience was like. Were they nervous? etc. Explain the following points about focus groups:

- The purpose of a focus group is to get information and ideas from you. Your experience is valid. NCSALL is interested in hearing what you have to say, and there is no one "right" answer.

- The goal of the focus group is to hear equally from everyone. It won't just be one large discussion for 3 hours; there will be a variety of activities, and sometimes you will work in small groups, sometimes there will be an open discussion, and sometimes everyone will be asked individually to say what they think. We encourage people to monitor themselves so that everyone

gets a chance to talk in open discussions.

- The information from this focus group will be used by NCSALL staff to help improve their activities. Some of the information will be incorporated into a larger draft agenda for research that is being developed over the course of the next year, and which will help to drive research in adult basic education over the next 10-15 years. Most of NCSALL's research money is already allocated to particular research projects (which you'll hear about) so the purpose of this focus group is not to define NCSALL's research during the life of its grant but to give input to a long-term agenda for adult basic education research which all funders (DOE, NIFL, etc.) can buy into.

- All information from this focus group will be confidential; that is, no one's name or the name of their program will ever be written in the notes. This is one of nine focus groups going on in four states in the south and five in New England, and the information from all of the focus groups like this will be compiled and presented as one big report.

- We'd like permission to tape this focus group, just as a back-up record in case we miss anything in our notes, but the primary form of record will be the notes that the facilitators keep. There are two facilitators; one will be leading the activity or discussion and the other will be taking notes. The results of the focus group will be typed up from their notes, but the tape could provide a valuable backup in case the notes are unclear, etc. Does anyone have any objection to being taped? If so, we don't need to do it.

- Here are some basic ground rules for focus groups: Everyone tries to contribute equally. We want to hear from everyone. Try not to interrupt others. Listen carefully to what others are saying. Ask questions about the process if at any time you are confused about what we're doing or why... OTHERS?

3. <u>Affinity Diagram: Issues and concerns</u> (40 minutes)

Explain to the group: This first activity is designed to get from you what your main concerns are in your work. Everyone should take a small stack of post-its (hand out) and on each post-it, write one question or problem that you are facing in your work. Here we are asking for broad concerns (things like "How do I get student Tom to come to class regularly?", can be stated as "What makes some students come to class regularly, others irregularly, and what can I do about it?") Take about 5 minutes silently, by yourself, to think of 3-4 questions or problems, and write them on the

post-its, one per post-it. Write legibly and as largely as possible on the post-its, as other people will be reading them.

Then, come together in a group of up to five people (if there are five people in total, make one group; if there are eight in the focus group, make two groups of four, etc.) Everyone stick their post-its on a big sheet of newsprint in no particularly order. Take a few moments to read all of the post-its. Then, as you talk with your group members, move "like" post-its together so that similar problems or questions are placed next to each other in groups. Continue until every post-it is part of a small group of post-its that has an "affinity". Then, take a marker and label each group with a 2-4 word paraphrase that categorizes what the overall problem or question is for all those post-its; e.g., "learner persistence" or "assessment of learning outcomes".

As a whole group, have a brief discussion of what you found out. If there are two groups, post both newsprints and ask people, during a short break, to read the other group's notes. Discussion should focus on where the similarity is in problems/questions. Keep newsprint posted for remainder of focus group.

4. Overview of NCSALL and its research (30 minutes)

Explain that you will give a brief overview of NCSALL, based on all the knowledge you have, about what NCSALL's goals and activities are. Use the overhead or handouts attached to guide you through this discussion. Explain that people can ask questions but because you are not a member of the NCSALL staff you might not always have the answer but you will convey the questions you don't know back to the NCSALL staff. Brief discussion

5. Analysis of if and how NCSALL's research is addressing your concerns (30 minutes)

Ask participants to look at the areas of NCSALL's research (learner motivation, classroom practice, staff development, assessment), and then to look at their categories of questions and tell you whether there is an overlap. What areas of concern are related to or are being addressed by NCSALL's research? Put a circle or a green star around these areas.

Lead a discussion with the following questions:

A. Ask participants to discuss, in the whole group, how NCSALL's research may help them address their questions or concerns; e.g., ask them to finish this sentence, "This research would be valuable if it...(focused on this aspect of the problem, included a particular population of students, etc...)"

B. Ask participants to suggest ways in which the results of this research could reach them in their classrooms so that it really would help address their problems; e.g., fill out this stem "This research would really help me with my question or problem if it....(came to me in a particular format...)"

Next, ask participants to think about where there is a gap between their areas of concern and NCSALL's research. What are the major categories of problems or questions that you have identified that aren't being addressed by NCSALL? Put a circle or red star around the areas of concern that aren't being addressed under NCSALL's research.

6. Developing 2-3 critical research questions (based on your concerns) for the long-term research agenda in ABE (30 minutes)

For the areas that are gaps between their problems and NCSALL research, explain that these areas could be part of the long-term research agenda for adult basic education, but they need to be phrased as specific questions for inclusion in the draft agenda. Ask participants to get into pairs, and have each pair take one of the areas that has been circled or red starred and try to come up with a specific question. Perhaps it is one of the questions on the post-it note, or perhaps it is a broader question that includes all of the specific post-it notes under that category. Try to arrange it so that most of the "gap" categories are covered by one or another pair; i.e., if there were 5 categories of problems/questions on the affinity diagram newsprint that were identified as not being addressed by NCSALL's research, try to have each pair take one of those categories to work on. If possible, it should be a category that one or both of the partners is interested in.

Give the pairs about 15 minutes to work on their question; they don't need to write it on newsprint, but it does need to be written out. Go around and ask each pair to read off their question, which the facilitator then writes up on newsprint. The wording doesn't have to be perfect, it just needs to convey the basic idea of what future research should focus on in that area. Quick discussion

7. Overview and discussion of the PDRN (45 minutes)

   Explain the idea of the PDRN, using the concept paper attached. Answer questions about the idea, then lead a brief discussion asking people to talk about what they think the PDRN could do to link practitioners with NCSALL. Take notes.

8. Thank people for their participation. Explain again what will happen with all the information (typed up in notes, compiled with other focus group notes, included in draft research agenda, sent to NCSALL staff to review and discuss how to take these ideas into account for their research and for the PDRN).

Format for writing up focus group notes:

Categories from Affinity Diagram and questions underneath (from Activity 3, from the newsprint/post-its): Please star once those categories that participants felt NCSALL was addressing in their research, and star twice those categories that participants felt NCSALL was not addressing in their research.

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

Ways in which participants felt NCSALL research could help them address their problems (from Activity 5A, from your notes):

Ways in which participants felt that NCSALL research could reach them in order to help them (from Activity 5B, from your notes):

Specific questions that should be added to the draft ABE research agenda (Activity 6, from newsprint):

Ideas for the PDRN (from Activity 7. from your notes):

Your comments and impressions from the focus group: What did you think went well? What didn't work? What struck you most about their comments? What would you stress from your own experience? Any other comments?

Appendix B
Participants in focus groups according to state

State	Number of Participants	Female	Male	Teacher*	Administrator/ Coordinator/ Counselor/ Program Director*
Georgia	8	5	3	8	0
Kentucky	7	5	2	3	4
Maine	5	5	0	5	2
Massachusetts	7	6	1	7	0
New Hampshire	10	9	1	8	2
Rhode Island	8	5	3	7	2
Tennessee	3	2	1	2	1
Vermont	7	5	2	6	2
Virginia	8	8	0	8	1
TOTALS	63	50	13	54	14

*numbers are duplicated for participants performing two roles

Appendix C
Number of affinity diagram items by category and state

Category	GA	KY	ME	MA	NH	RI	TN	VT	VA	Totals
1. Recruitment, retention, motivation, participation	4	5	3	4	22	11	5	0	4	58
2. Program and policy issues	0	1	10	7	6	7	0	2	8	41
3. Curriculum and instruction	1	2	4	4	9	5	1	0	2	28
4. Assessment and standards	0	1	8	7	5	2	0	1	3	27
5. "Special" students	1	4	3	1	9	4	1	0	3	26
6. Staff issues and professional development	3	5	7	1	1	2	2	1	2	24
7. Impact on students' lives outside the classroom	5	3	3	1	5	2	0	0	2	21
8. "Integrated" classrooms	2	1	0	5	5	2	0	0	1	16
Totals	16	22	38	30	62	35	9	4	25	241

Appendix D
Questions for the research agenda

"Special" students (10)

- *How do we know whether there is a learning disability or a language barrier that is hampering an ESOL student? (MA)*
- *How do you develop and document student education plans for special populations, i.e. ESL, aging population, and learning disabled? (KY)*
- *How to diagnose a learning disability in an adult and strategies to instruct the adult? (ME)*
- *What teaching methods are best to work with adult students who have experienced trauma, who have little sense of "self"? (MA)*
- *How can research direct teachers of students with developmental, linguistic and/or mental health issues to succeed in adult classes? (NH)*
- *How can researchers address the needs of teens vs. adults in adult classes? (NH)*
- *How can we best provide educational and social services to the non-traditional learner: assess the needs, establish individual education programs and make referrals to programs which would best serve them? (RI)*
- *Expand -- or ensure expansion of -- learning disability research to ADULTS. (VT)*
- *What are the best approaches to help adults with learning disabilities? (VA)*

Program and policy issues (9)

- *How are adult learners impacted by successful collaboration of adult ed and social service agencies? (ME)*
- *What are the characteristics of a model adult education program and what are the costs? (ME)*
- *What are good models for building strong community support for adult education? (MA)*

- *Given that some students may be incapable of passing the GED exam, how can ABE Programs serve these students' needs (by providing other options and maintaining social support)? (NH)*

- *Is funding available for increasing classroom time and obtaining classroom supplies? How does increasing class length and/or increasing the school year affect student learning? (NH)*

- *Can we do a comparative study of learners from across the country - acquire and disseminate information on characteristics and similarities of ABE learners -- their needs, goals, ambitions -- to form a national level portrait of the adult learner? (RI)*

- *How can we develop a better intake system - can we research what interview methods are successful and what an interviewer should know about a learner to ensure that the learner will be appropriately placed? (RI)*

- *Compare/contrast adult education service systems. Points of comparison might include delivery models, funding distribution streams, quality indicators, credentialing. (VT)*

- *What approach will promote a realistic view and understanding of the value of adult ed in the community? (VA)*

Recruitment, retention, motivation, participation (8)

- *How can ABE students be motivated to learn new things with all the distractions of their lives? (NH)*

- *What help is available to motivate ADD students to learn in the classroom? (NH)*

- *How do we encourage/validate the long term student (basic ed) who won't be taking the GED for a long time or ever? (NH)*

- *How can we develop an effective recruitment strategy to enroll basic learners? (NH)*

- *Can creative solutions be found to remove roadblocks that are preventing attendance? (NH)*

- *How do we assess the retention ability of students and how do we adjust teaching strategies to improve retention ability? (KY)*

- *Examine retention parameters regarding male and female adult students subdivided into two basic age brackets: 16 to 19 years and above 19. (GA)*

- *What effect does the lack of sufficient facilities have on recruitment and retention? (GA)*

Assessment and standards (7)

- *How can we accurately assess the reading levels of our students? (NH)*

- *Could a simple standard test be developed so ESOL students could evaluate themselves? (NH)*

- *How do we as educators know what our adult learners are learning, when they are using it and what form of assessment should be used? (MA)*

- *What are some learner-supportive ways to measure progress towards individual learner's goals/needs in a multi-level class? (MA)*

- *What are all the possible standards models available and how are they incorporated into adult education standards that will inform classroom instruction? (ME)*

- *What level of learning or skill does a student need in order to use portfolio assessment as a means of assessment? How does a student self evaluate? (ME)*

- *What are the most effective methods of assessment with the adult learner at varying levels? (ME)*

"Integrated" classrooms (4)

- *What is the impact on learning of the tension between different cultural and sub-cultural backgrounds and the dominant U.S. culture? Provide teachers with effective mechanisms and tools to bridge cultural gaps. (VA)*

- *Explore the variety of effective technology and curriculum for adult non-readers and determine applicability to low-level readers, learning disabled, developmentally disabled, multilingual, various cultural backgrounds, and regional differences. (GA)*

- *What is the best way to teach reading in a multi-level classroom? (NH)*

- *What are some effective practices to manage a multi-level class including planning, curriculum and ongoing assessments? (MA)*

Staff issues and professional development (4)

- *What constitutes effective adult literacy teachers and/or staff on some measurable components of attitude, commitment, and equity? (GA)*

- *Does the education level of instructor affect student achievement? Educational level vs. teacher certificate (KY)*

- *What are appropriate means of evaluation for all staff (i.e., administrators, teachers, support staff, etc.) and what impact does this evaluation have on the program design? How does the evaluation maintain the level of professionalism ? (ME)*

- *What is an effective practitioner? How can I assess my effectiveness? Are full-time practitioners more effective than part-time? If so, how ? If they are more effective, then how can we move toward full-time employment? (VA)*

Impact on students' lives outside the classroom (3)

- *"Real life link": Is this measurable? What can we do to help? (GA)*

- *Social issues and attitudes regarding the value of education: What are businesses expecting from our GED graduates? What would make them more eligible for the job? (GA)*

- *What can we do in our classrooms that will help our students break the low achievement cycle in their families? (NH)*

Curriculum and instruction (2)

- *What are the (most) appropriate uses -- if any -- of technology in adult education? (VT)*

- *What are the most effective teaching and assessment methods for each of the various described multiple intelligences (assumes building off the present multiple intelligences study)? (VT)*

Appendix E
Categories of issues of concern to focus group practitioners

Category	From affinity diagram	Item for research agenda	From research discussion
1. Recruitment, retention, motivation, participation	52	8	5
2. Program and policy issues	36	9	5
3. Curriculum and instruction	29	2	2
4. Assessment and standards	27	7	4
5. "Special" students	26	10	0
6. Staff issues and professional development	21	4	2
7. Impact of students' lives outside of the classroom	18	3	5
8. "Integrated" classrooms	16	4	1

NCSALL

National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy

The Mission of NCSALL

The National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL) will pursue basic and applied research in the field of adult basic education, build partnerships between researchers and practitioners, disseminate research and best practices to practitioners, scholars and policymakers, and work with the field to develop a comprehensive research agenda.

NCSALL is a collaborative effort between the Harvard Graduate School of Education and World Education. The Center for Literacy Sturdies at The University of Tennessee, Rutgers University, and Portland State University are NCSALL's partners. NCSALL is funded by the U.S. Department of Education through its Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI) and OERI's National Institute for Postsecondary Education, Libraries, and Lifelong Learning.

NCSALL's Research Projects

The goal of NCSALL's research is to provide information that is used to improve practice in programs that offer adult basic education, English to Speakers of Other Languages, and adult secondary education services. In pursuit of this goal, NCSALL has undertaken research projects in four areas: (1) learner motivation, (2) classroom practice and the teaching/learning interaction, (3) staff development, and (4) assessment.

Dissemination Initiative

NCSALL's dissemination initiative focuses on ensuring that the results of research reach practitioners, administrators, policymakers, and scholars of adult education. NCSALL publishes a quarterly magazine entitled *Focus on Basics*; an annual scholarly review of major issues, current research and best practices entitled *Review of Adult Learning and Literacy*; and periodic research reports and articles entitled *NCSALL Reports*. In addition, NCSALL sponsors the Practitioner Dissemination and Research Network, designed to link practitioners and researchers and to help practitioners apply findings from research in their classrooms and programs. NCSALL also has a web site:
http://hugse1.harvard.edu/~ncsall

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NCSALL

National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy

Reports

Reports are NCSALL articles and research findings that can be purchased through World Education. The following reports are available:

1. Merrifield, J. (1998). *Contested Ground: Performance and Accountability in Adult Education.*
2. Purcell-Gates, V., Degener, S., & Jacobson, E. (1998). *Adult Literacy Program Practice: A Typology Across Dimensions of Life-Contextualized/Decontextualized and Dialogic/Monologic.*
3. Tyler, J., Murnane, R., & Willett, J. (in press). *The Economic Impact of the GED* (tentative title).
4. Bingman, M., Smith, C., & Stewart, K. (1998). *Practitioners Speak: Contributing to a Research Agenda for Adult Basic Education.*
5. Rudd, R., Zacharia, C., & Daube, K. (in press). *Integrating Health and Literacy: Adult Educators' Experiences.*
6. Beder, H. (in press). *The Outcomes and Impacts of Adult LiteracyEducation in the United States.*

Focus on Basics

Focus on Basics is the quarterly publication of NCSALL. The following issues are available for purchase through World Education:

1. Vol. 1, Iss. A (Feb. 1997), *Research.*
2. Vol. 1, Iss. B (May 1997), *Reading.*
3. Vol. 1, Iss. C (Sept. 1997), *Multilevel Classrooms.*
4. Vol. 1, Iss. D (Dec. 1997), *Content-Based Instruction.*
5. Vol. 2, Iss. A (Mar. 1998), *Learner Motivation.*
6. Vol. 2, Iss. B (June 1998), *The GED.*
7. Vol. 2, Iss. C (Sept. 1998), *Theory of Change.*

All of the above materials can be ordered by contacting the NCSALL Dissemination Office, World Education, 44 Farnsworth Street, Boston, MA 02210-1211; telephone (617) 482-9485; e-mail NCSALL@WorldEd.org.